The Made-Up State

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In March 1969, the second annual beauty pageant for warias, called the Queen of Miss Imitation Girls, was held at the Hotel Duta in Jakarta. The event provided a stage on which warias could demonstrate a capacity to accomplish a polished form of feminine beauty and thus participate in a national public. The inaugural Queen of Miss Imitation Girls competition had been held the year before and was an important site at which warias first became visible to Governor Ali Sadikin. After witnessing their potential for accomplishing a polished feminine beauty, the city government bestowed recognition to warias to minimize the disruption that they posed to public order. As one account of the 1968 meeting between warias and Sadikin outlined, “In a similar way to some women, banci also prostitute themselves because of economic need and other pressing reasons, including that they feel an imbalance in themselves” (Selecta 1968, 19). The solution that Sadikin put forward, one that was tied implicitly to an understanding of self-improvement in the service of economic development, rested on what the government called guidance programs. Guidance programs sought to improve warias’ appearances by providing them with training in skills related to feminine beauty and became a central component of the municipal government’s efforts to discipline waria by encouraging them to participate in projects of self-improvement. The municipal government asserted that this effort would allow an “understanding of which banci are genuine and which are false . . . because most banci in Jakarta are men who dress up as banci and ‘prostitute’ themselves only for economic needs, . . . If banci are provided with economic activities, it
will decrease the number of banci on the streets of the city and clean up the city from the unpleasant view that they create” (Selecta 1968, 19).

Warias responded to this call, engaging in projects of self-improvement that positioned them as authentic citizens against a backdrop of national development in the early New Order. Yet unfortunately for the city government, this strategy did not diminish the public visibility of warias but rather led them to mobilize to further reduce the temporal and spatial restrictions on their presence. Jakarta was the location where Indonesia’s return to an emphatically global form of capitalist development was staged following the instability and insularity that characterized the rule of first president, Sukarno. Experts and technocrats, most notably US-trained economists, oversaw a process that Bradley Simpson (2008, 3) described as “military modernization,” dismantling overt state controls over the economy and quelling dissent to facilitate foreign investment. Although this period witnessed the military playing a greater role in political and social life, the New Order also saw the incorporation of Euro-American popular culture and fashion and a related anxiety about the impact of unruly youth cultures on Indonesian national identity (Anderson 1990, 186–87). Despite the violence with which Suharto maintained his grip on power, the New Order state witnessed the growth of spaces for middle-class consumption and leisure, where politics and the potential for unrest that that term conjured up were kept at bay (Leeuwen 2011, 4). Warias, whose emergent visibility was facilitated by this intersection of military rule and emergent forms of body-centered consumption among the middle classes, reveal the ways in which gender shaped the boundaries of technological participation in national mass publics with a mixture of discipline and pleasure through practices related to self-cultivation.

The centrality of outer appearances in shaping who could participate in national mass publics was evident at the first Jakarta Fair in 1968. President Suharto, who inaugurated the opening of the fair, described it as an opportunity for Indonesians to display their “greater utility to work for progress and the development of the economy” (Suharto 1968). Warias appeared in this context as theater performers, film stars, and proprietors of small and large beauty salons. Their carefully composed feminine beauty reflected a capacity for self-improvement, anticipating an obsession with “talk of improvement” (Li 2007, 1) that has come to characterize contemporary Indonesian culture. Press photographs taken at the Queen of Miss Imitation Girls competition reveal the kinds of feminine beauty that warias drew on to mediate between national and global visual symbols of modernity. The winner holds a large trophy and mace and wears a crown in the style of a US beauty queen of the 1950s. She and the warias who surround her demonstrate a studied commitment to the skills of styling hair, applying makeup, and designing and selecting the clothing required to achieve
a polished femininity (figures 5 and 6). When performed in circumscribed contexts, warias’ recognized position as beauty experts was a demonstration of an authentically Indonesian modernity.

Interpreted in this way, the integration of warias into national modernity was unremarkable, inasmuch as it reflected a broader pattern that harnessed the meanings of public gender to a project of development. Warias’ skillful practice of femininity allowed them to become emblematic of beauty as a demonstration of possibilities for self-improvement widely observed in other postcolonial settings (Ochoa 2014; Jackson 2003; Besnier 2002; Cannell 1999). But the integration of Indonesian warias into national development digressed from an individualizing framework that rested on a capitalist production of the individual self in pursuit of nothing but its own success. Despite state experts’ incorporation

**FIGURE 5.** Contestants at the second Queen of Miss Imitation Girls competition held at the Duta Hotel in Central Jakarta, 1969.

Source: Antara Photography Archives and the Indonesian Press Photography Service (IPPHOS)
FIGURE 6. The winner of the second Queen of Miss Imitation Girls competition in 1969, Sonny Sudarma, is presented with a ceremonial mace and trophy.

Source: Antara Photography Archives and the Indonesian Press Photography Service (IPPHOS)

of Euro-American concepts of gender and sex premised on pairs of mind/body and male/female dualisms, warias’ narratives of gender did not rest on the view that the inner and outer parts of the person comprised an opposing pair. More often, warias framed the body as akin to an interface between self and society. As one waria explained, in terms that would have been similar to those current in the early New Order, public gender was like an obstacle that all warias had to work to overcome: “To live as a woman in this way is to live with a contradiction within your body. From your nature, style and everything else, how on earth should we present ourselves? How should we live a worthy life like a woman? What there is, there comes a time to make yourself more feminine, and this is not spontaneous. It has to be learned. And so, those waria who are still dressing up with a style that isn’t yet stable like a woman, this is what becomes an issue in
society.” In terms that bring to mind anthropological descriptions of personhood in Java as an “awareness of vulnerability in interaction” (Boellstorff 2004, 475), warias’ participation in development during the New Order rested on a concept of bodily cultivation that sought to grapple with a self that was always in dialogue with its social context.3

Interpreting ethnographic and historical accounts of the role of public femininity in claims to recognition offers a way to approach warias not according to discrete concepts of gender and sexuality at the level of the individual but rather as part of the broader emphasis on visual forms of power that have shaped how belonging in postcolonial Indonesia has been imagined and experienced in everyday life (Steedly 2013; Strassler 2020). I develop this theoretical insight by showing how, in certain spaces, modern feminine beauty for warias during the New Order was understood not as a form of self-expression but of participation in society (masyarakat). Despite their collective orientation toward society, warias nevertheless emphasized individualized acts of self-improvement. Yet what warias called a “contradiction in your body” was not precisely the same as the “wrong body” discourse that came to be the common narrative consolidated via medico-legal definitions of transsexuality described in the previous chapter (Stone 1992). The contradiction expressed by the waria quoted above instead indexed an understanding of appearances as a site for navigating a relationship to a public—and hence an understanding of citizenship—that facilitated other opportunities to pursue partial integration into the sociotechnical imaginary of state rule to accomplish recognition. For the state, the benefit of warias becoming beauty experts rested on a logic that in doing so they could limit the disruption that warias’ gender nonconformity caused. This is perhaps why warias’ expertise in feminine beauty resulted in a relatively conditional form of acceptance, a form of recognition for which warias were responsible but over which they had little control.

This chapter describes how warias came to occupy the role of beauty experts in the early New Order. To be sure, warias’ integration into these schemes was a form of discipline, a counterpart to the raids by municipal police, as a strategy that aimed to manage risks associated with public gender when it threatened to disrupt public order. Yet warias commonly reflected on the history of their integration into vocational guidance programs in salon work, fashion design, and related fields in positive terms, saying that it facilitated forms of recognition that translated into citizenship. Warias were objects of expertise, then, but they were also active participants in governmental technologies that combined functionalist and aesthetic logics to defend public order. In this respect, warias’ capacity to accomplish social acceptance rested on a set of logics that were similar to other components of New Order rule. Suzanne Moon described urban improvement in the city of Bandung in the 1970s as constituting a “technologically systematic
integration of people” through processes applied to other municipal problems, which made “them and their work necessary and desirable to others within society” and therefore “integral to the smooth material functioning of the city” (2015, 192). In addition to being adjudicated on their capacity to be “of use to society,” a turn of phrase common among warias themselves, the relationship between self-improvement and citizenship reflected a tenet of spatial governance that Nikolas Rose has described as “a double movement of autonomization and responsibilization” (1999, 170). Rather than simply being coercive, authorities produce “a web of visibilities, or public codes and private embarrassments over personal conduct,” one that results in “government through the calculated administration of shame” (Rose 1999, 73, emphasis in original). Efforts to manage public gender was part and parcel of the process of “rendering technical” (Li 2007, 7) society (masyarakat) at the scale of the city. Warias leveraged the affective charge of public gender to other ends. Competing in a pageant, or working in a beauty salon, was not only about developing skills in a particular area to express an inner sense of self but served as a form of participation as an economic unit in the city and the nation. This individualized format of participation, the results of which were never assured, meant that warias were ultimately responsible for the success or failure of their integration within a collective public.

**Gendered Publics**

From the earliest years of the New Order, warias were recognized as individuals who were both applying feminine beauty to the body and dispensing it as digestible advice to other citizens. Such skills were in particular demand for weddings, public rituals that connected gender to projects of national belonging. Identifying the centrality of expertise in fields of feminine beauty, Tom Boellstorff observed: “The ultimate expression of this salon work is wedding makeup and hairstyling, where the bride, and also the groom, are ‘made up’ as prototypes of the true Indonesian, the idealized citizen-subject” (2005, 105). A similar sentiment was expressed by Maya, who like many other warias of her generation described salon work—and makeup for weddings in particular—as a prototypical form of prestasi or “good deeds,” through which she saw herself as able to obtain a more respectable position in society. But even as Maya framed her achievements in the skills associated with wedding makeup as culminating in a public recognition of her refined status as an authentic waria, she also conceptualized prestasi in terms of achievements that were limited to her as an individual. In this respect, hers was an individualized form of participation in society, one in which both the achievements associated with beauty and the risks of failure were
articulated on moral terms. Accordingly, Maya insisted that her skills in feminine beauty were her own—achievements through which she revealed an essential or innate character with greater clarity and which did not extend to any other waria.

This emphasis on individualized accomplishments that could be accumulated over time to achieve further successes recalls the relationship between beauty contests and self-cultivation in post–New Order Indonesia. Writing in the context of a beauty pageant that was an important demonstration of a coherent regional identity, Nicholas Long observed *prestasi* as reflecting “not a momentary event or performance” but demonstrating a “quality of people, a revelation of character and capability that can be accumulated through time to increase one’s agency in the social world” (2007, 111). This understanding that the “institutionally unbound” (Bartky 1990, 75) quality of feminine beauty (and beauty as a feminized realm more broadly) makes it an ambiguous vehicle for accomplishing recognition is a view shared by feminist theorists. Sandra Lee Bartky described how becoming a beauty expert is a form of “discipline that can provide the individual upon whom it is imposed with a sense of mastery as well as a secure sense of identity” (1990, 77). Such experiences appear to be particularly charged at moments of great political and economic uncertainty. Feminine expertise performs a crucial role, given that it provides “confidence from following rules through technical mastery of the world” as well as “revelation and truth in conditions of uncertainty” (Jones 2010, 271). Attending to warias’ participation in state citizenship reveals how, even during the authoritarian New Order, state power did not only take a unilinear and surveilling guise. As a form of selective display that was oriented toward a public, and a prototypical form of *prestasi* that warias performed on others in the course of their work as beauty experts, the adoption of feminine expertise could have unpredictable results. For warias, the paradox of visibility was experienced through everyday acts of seeing and being seen that required constant image management, the results of which they ultimately had little control.

Warias’ position as experts in modern beauty was consolidated by the beginning of the 1970s, as they established reputations as some of the nation’s most skilled beauticians and salon workers. The centrality of this form of participation in national society through the symbolic universe granted by heteronormative gendering during the New Order is usefully summarized by Tom Boellstorff (2007, 111): “Warias signify their gender by making themselves up, but when they make up Indonesian women or cut the hair of Indonesian men they ‘make them up’ as better representatives of proper modern Indonesian womanhood and manhood, without which what the state terms its family principle of heteronormative governance (*azas kekeluargaan*) would not be intelligible.” This view was echoed by one sixty-five-year-old waria who recalled that the beginning of
the 1970s saw a transformation in the position of warias that was partially the result of their successes in transforming themselves. This understanding rested on a delicate play on the relationship between gender as both innate and as constructed: “Our role as beauty experts goes to greater limits and is better [than that of non-waría women or men], because we do it in our own style. Because we embrace beauty work with all our soul, customers are really happy with the results.” She cited this innate skill in the field of feminine beauty as the chief reason why “people prefer to be served by waría.” Adding that “society knows that many waría are interested in salons, in beauty, are experts [ahlí] in fields of fashion, design and others,” she highlighted that warías’ acceptance rested on their capacity to be “of use to society.” Warías’ engagement with beauty as a field of technical expertise, however, revealed the more unruly possibilities of recognition by mass publics.

The key concept that warías used to describe their role as beauty experts in the modern nation was dandan. As a commonly used term among warías in narrative accounts in everyday life, dandan refers to everyday yet often temporary forms of gendering, most commonly through hairstyling, the use of cosmetics, and dress (Boellstorff 2005, 93). Yet dandan was also central to warías’ performance of gender as a component of their understanding of the self. It was through dandan that warías not only showed that they possessed a woman’s soul but also made that interior sense of gender more complete. Describing this relationship between dandan and the self, one waría explained that “if you are a waría you dandan, you wear women’s clothing, and change your voice [to a higher pitch]. . . . I learned how to do dandan by myself, just with a mirror and some makeup.” These practices, when put together, served as the means to enact an improved public presentation. Warías are not the only individuals who practice dandan, which refers to a broader condition of making up and being made up, particularly for special occasions. Yet for warías, dandan is an important practice closely tied to visibility in public, a process wherein they apply expert knowledge to appearances in order to be seen by an audience. In this respect, the relationship between warías and dandan is exceptional but not unique. It parallels Marcia Ochoa’s description of transformistas in Venezuela, where the use of plastic surgery, makeup, hairstyling, and technologies like hormone and silicone injections was not understood as the fulfillment of an a priori identity but seen as “[utilizing] technologies to allow the feminine body to emerge” (2014, 158), a possibility that arose within distinctive histories of national modernity.

It was this feature that made dandan for warías different from that performed by gay men. For gay men, the practice of dandan took place in particular circumscribed contexts and in ways that in some respects accentuated the artificiality of its manufacture (Boellstorff 2005, 167). As used among warías, dandan
exceeded an emphasis on appearances, articulating a more thoroughgoing form of self-improvement. Warias described dandan to me not as altering or transforming the natural or preexisting biological reality but as a necessary part of externalization of a hitherto concealed self. This understanding of gender as a form of knowledge that, when applied to the body, makes an inherent character apparent differs from dominant theoretical considerations of gender that frame it as related to processes that lead to stabilization of sexuality and gender as identities (Butler 1990). Distinct from gender as a constantly iterated or performative practice that naturalizes heterosexuality on individual terms, the practice of dandan among warias, as I interpret it, reflects an understanding of personhood similar to the interplay between inner and outer parts of the self, akin to aesthetic allusions revealed or concealed, a concept present in classical Javanese literature (e.g., Florida 1995). Emerging from a history in which the bodies and faces of Indonesians served as a semiotic object that had condensed race and class norms since the colonial period, dandan was a technology through which the boundaries of belonging to a modern Indonesian public were established and governed.

The practices that warias called dandan, which linked them to a distinctive aesthetic format related to global norms of feminine beauty, was present from at least the 1950s. The history of dandan reflects a form of discipline that served as a counterpart to the state’s biopolitical efforts to establish authority over the natural grounds for sex on the grounds of physiology and reproduction. During the New Order, an invasive program of restricting women’s fertility through reproductive health programs had served as the material means through which women were encouraged to understand themselves as “procreators of the nation” (Suryakusuma 2011, 101). Femininity at this time served a malleable set of symbols for debating and contesting social change. It was a supposedly apolitical domain in which “tensions and anxieties that accompanied political repression, rapid and uneven modernization, and economic inequality and instability were displaced onto the figures of woman and the family” (Brenner 1999, 36). Attending to dandan, even while focusing attention on norms of public comportment, both reveals warias’ position within a broader effort made by the state to assert authority over the recognition of public gender and stresses the force of images of femininity that did not originate in domesticity or the nuclear family. The position of warias as participants in this more public register of femininity is reflected in one archival photograph taken in the early 1970s of a group of “wadam of the capital” who are gathered with Martha Tilaar, the prominent owner of the Sari Ayu cosmetics company (figure 7).

Warias’ appearance here in the orbit of Sari Ayu, a well-known Indonesian cosmetics company that was a “representation of the face of the nation in a transnational age” (Saraswati 2013, 76; see also Barendregt 2011), reflects how
Figure 7. A group of “wadam” in Jakarta, gathered together with Martha Tilaar, the owner of the cosmetics company Sari Ayu. Courtesy of the National Library of Indonesia

warias’ participation in femininity must be contextualized within the broader texture of Indonesian national modernity. More important, warias’ role as beauty experts—primarily revealed through warias’ own recollections but also in glimpses of them in the historical archive—demonstrated how gender functioned not only as an individualized form of expression but also as a technological mediation that facilitated participation in national publics. To refer to warias’ practice of dandan as oriented toward a national public, however, may give a sense of a single or unified frame of vision and audience to whom their expertise in fields of beauty was addressed. As had been the case in other settings and in previous historical periods, warias’ ascendance to the role of beauty experts continued to be limited to circumscribed contexts where their potential for self-improvement, tied closely to a specific experience of bodily cultivation, was recognized and valorized. It is important to stress that warias could not easily move between different publics with the same degree of comfort. This was not a condition limited to warias. Beauty pageants for women during the New Order did not go untested and were at times a catalyst for volatile public debates over the relationship between appropriate sexual morality and national identity (Pausacker 2015). Similarly, warias’ participation in public life continued to have an unpredictable
quality, reflected in the fact that their skillful practice of dandan led to both forms of recognition as well as efforts to reduce their visibility to general society.

Dandan was an important vehicle for crafting a legible if aspirational claim to recognition as part of Indonesian national modernity. The warias who were present during the New Order recalled their ability to accomplish the status of beauty experts as a critical means through which they could demonstrate that they were “authentically waria.” What this meant was that their claim to authenticity through the application of expertise rested, in important ways, on the recognition of that expertise by an audience. The gendered body was not secondary but a crucial medium through which the boundaries of participation in public life were made in Indonesia. In this sense, warias’ experiences show that even during the authoritarian New Order, the state’s control over the population was subject to ambiguity and flux at moments when claims to shared meanings broke down. Public gender shows how what Daromir Rudnyckyj (2010, 159) has described as a postauthoritarian state of “governing through affect” that rests on a relationship to the self as an “ethics of shared sentiment” has a history that extends at least to the New Order. Through the transfer of technologies of feminization onto methods of self-fashioning, warias engaged with “Indonesia” not as a singular or stable entity but as part of an unruly seeing public.

**Authenticity and Imitation**

One of the first stages on which warias skillfully wielded technologies of feminization to forge a sense of belonging within a national public was the Jakarta Fair, where warias were invited performers from at least 1968 to 1972. One waria, Tini, recounted that a group of performers had first worked at venues affiliated with the Jakarta Fair called “Sasana Andrawina” and the “Paradise Hall” (*Mingguan Djaja* 1968c, 4). Among warias, the spaces affiliated with the Jakarta Fair provided a glimpse of the possibility of working in professions through which they could cultivate their skills in feminine beauty, and in doing so contribute—with the oversight of city social workers through city-run guidance programs—to a broader project of development. Once the fair had concluded, however, it was unclear whether warias’ presence on the city’s streets would be tolerated as a component of public life. A common complaint voiced by warias in the popular press concerned the difficulty of finding ongoing, respectable forms of paid employment. This was also the most frequent justification given by warias as to why they sold sex on the streets of the city late at night, and in turn why they faced such fierce discrimination as a result. This negotiation with the meanings
of public order had positioned them as part of a long-standing problem of gender nonconformity that stretched to the birth of Indonesia.

Warias also reflected on the Jakarta Fair as a crucial step in consolidating a collective and coherent sense of self-identification as a group. One seventy-year-old waria remembered the Paradise Hall not only as a place of work, where warias were able to accomplish recognition as beauty experts and to earn a living, but as a gathering place where warias came together to enjoy one another’s company. She recalled, “From the ticket sellers, the bartenders and the hostesses, to the dancers, all of the employees were waria! There were waria strippers, waria pole dancers, and waria snake dancers.” Although warias, she explained, were “undisciplined” at this time—referring both to their public presence and to their designation as an object of nuisance laws who required “guidance”—the advent of the Paradise Hall meant that, for the first time, they had a location in which to work and to forge a sense of solidarity imagined as a collective.

Although venues like the Paradise Hall operated on an irregular basis, they served as a location where warias asserted a presentable form of femininity that distanced themselves from an association with public sexuality. These contexts, which gradually resulted in the establishment of more permanent settings such as nightclubs and bars, generated substantial if voyeuristic interest in warias among the citizens of the city. The relationship between trans femininity and forms of bodily cultivation through performance in Indonesia was not unprecedented within Indonesian culture and throughout Southeast Asia at this time. Warias were an important component of political communication during the 1960s, appearing as “outspoken proponent[s] of new ways and ideas” (Hatley 1971, 100). Even prior to the advent of visual forms of communication and the rapid growth of consumer capitalism during the New Order, warias were observed as communicating with a national public. As James Peacock observed, “[The] transvestite singer . . . regularly and directly exhorts an audience to be madju [progress-oriented] and loyal to the nation. . . . The transvestite addresses a system, the Nation” (1968, 208–9). Describing the performance of femininity associated with bakla in the Philippines, Fenella Cannell similarly queried the centrality of expression of individualized sexual or gender identity, describing performances of femininity akin to the mediations that were performed by a shaman in ritual practice. Seen as “recapturings of power, not literally through possession, but through a wrapping of the body in symbols of protective status,” such performances served as a “transformation of the personal by proximity to the power it imitate[d]” (1999, 223). Understood as the mediation of the body through gender and as part of wider universe of symbols that facilitate political communication, warias’ appearance at the Jakarta Fair highlighted how disciplinary mechanisms of
public gender gained power through a relationship to an affective experience of public spectatorship.

Warias’ access to the skills and locations for performing urban-centered forms of feminine beauty during the New Order positioned them as a component of the technologies through which they asserted that they were public symbols of the nation’s place in a modern, global order. These possibilities were facilitated by new locations at which warias could convey desires for improvement, ones that channeled the functionalist and aesthetic logics of New Order developmentalism into public gender. But by making up themselves and others, not only as a project of self-cultivation but as a means of participating in the unruly processes of forging a relationship to a national public that always contained the possibility of exceeding the nation, warias demonstrated the potential mutability of all gendered bodies and forms of social status that facilitated or prohibited participation in public life. At the beginning of the New Order, warias asserted that the body of the person who was performing was not a barrier to the expert application of femininity or to the assertion of a modern sense of selfhood tied to the possibility and promise of becoming an authentically national subject. Nevertheless, the possibilities of technology to enable access to citizenship remained conditional, entering into a traffic in images—one that included the body itself—which could evoke different reactions, depending on which public had assembled to see them.

This play on differently assembled publics and the prospect of authentic participation through the technology that makes them up is reflected in the “Queen of Miss Imitation Girls” beauty pageant. The use of the word “imitation” insinuates artifice, bringing to mind Stephen Gundle’s description of midcentury beauty pageants in the United States, “the artificial creation of a fantasy event” at which the “illusion of substance rested on all concerned, organizers, spectators, press, and contestants, taking it seriously” (2008, 257). Yet the first winner of the competition should not be dismissed as an inauthentic parody of femininity. The cultivation of appearances was a distinctive stance that was primarily framed in terms of spectatorship as a means to bind together publics through a shared experience. Warias were not the only Indonesians who participated in beauty pageants during the New Order; pageants were and continued to be a popular commercial pursuit, a stage from which to establish spectatorship along the lines of a safe, carefully constructed, multicultural fantasy of the representation of difference (Long 2007). In this case, a sense of interiority was not necessarily linked to gender but rather to a sense of emergence within a national public that was not only imagined but demonstrated and felt through the body.

The experience of recognition draws attention to the specific meanings of imitation in this context. Judith Butler has famously theorized gender as performative to claim that “the original identity after which gender fashions itself is
an imitation without an origin” (Butler 1990, 137). Yet the specific genealogy of the imitation in relation to gender for warias must be considered in light of its relationship to the terms “authentic” (asli) and “false” (palsu), keywords of Indonesia’s experience of colonial and postcolonial history. As discussed in chapter 1, asli is central to how individuals understand themselves in terms of Indonesian national identity and belonging: “It is the ultimate criterion for belonging; what belongs to Indonesia and is deserving of recognition is that which is authentic” (Boellstorff 2005, 214). Palsu in turn refers to something that is manufactured through technology and as such subject to human intervention, in ways that the asli can never be. This anxiety about authenticity reflects the relationships between Europeans and Indonesians that emerged during the colonial encounter (Siegel 1997). Recall that the distinction between the authentic and the false underpinned a racialized discourse of difference that framed who was permitted to wear modern, Western clothes in public in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the late nineteenth century, some quarters of Dutch colonial society viewed the increasing numbers of young Indonesians who wore Western clothing as inadequate imitations or failed subjects of an inauthentic modernity (Mrázek 2002; van der Meer 2020). Members of colonial society rebuked these young Indonesian men through newspaper articles and other public forums, holding them up as counterfeits who had abandoned their authentic cultural roots to participate in the modern world.

The designation of warias as “imitation girls” in the early part of the New Order must be assessed in terms of a historical resonance with responses to the adoption of European clothing by Indonesians during the colonial period. As Arnout van der Meer described, the act of donning European clothing by non-Europeans in early-twentieth-century Indonesia was “both empowering and disruptive, as it raised questions about how one’s appearance reflected one’s ethnic, religious, and national identities” (2020, 14). The recognition of warias’ femininity, a gendering that was (as was all gender) “crafted through human action” (Boellstorff 2007, 111), placed it under suspicion of falsehood. What was seen as discontinuous was not anatomical sex and outer appearances, but the very form that the style of public participation in postcolonial modernity should take. Warias’ participation was not an effort to mimic or reproduce “woman” as an essentialized biological or individualized form of gender on ontological terms. In any case, such an ontological or biological reality was not yet fixed for anyone. Rather, warias were Indonesians who performed an alternative vision of global modernity, reflecting a connection to a transnational femininity and a future that rendered them under suspicion of belonging to the palsu, the false. Within this historical horizon of appearances and its relationship to a mass public, authenticity was not concerned
with the accomplishment of a prior sense of self—a mirror or alignment between inner and outer parts of the person—but rather highlighted the central role that public gender played in making up what it was to be and become Indonesian.

The Fantastic Dolls

Emerging via the public profile that participation in the Jakarta Fair enabled, warías established several independent performance groups in the city in the late 1960s and 1970s, leveraging diverse spaces and audiences for the performance and positive evaluation of transgender femininity. In Jakarta, I met several founding members of the Fantastic Dolls, a performance group founded in the late 1970s, the most famous and enduring group of waría performers in Indonesian history. Warías of different ages, ranging from fifty to seventy, whom I met in the course of fieldwork responded with a mixture of delight and pride when I asked them whether they had seen the Fantastic Dolls perform, and warías in each of my field sites and from many different parts of Indonesia fondly recalled the group’s iconic status, which for many represented the pinnacle of warías’ ascendance to the position of national beauty experts. The Fantastic Dolls also attracted widespread interest in the national media, lauded as an exemplary group of warías who strived for acceptance and to be understood as a part of Indonesian society. One former member of the Fantastic Dolls and a senior waría leader, Nancy Iskandar, recalled the enormous popularity, glamorous reputation, and fees corresponding with high ticket prices that the group commanded for their performances in cities throughout Indonesia.

The Fantastic Dolls were established in 1977, having grown out of an array of performance groups that had been founded earlier in the decade by the well-known community leader Myrna Bambang. One original member of the Fantastic Dolls, Meifei—who was born in 1947 and raised in Jakarta—had first started working in 1967 as a performer at the Taman Ria amusement park located in the city’s central square. It was around this time that Meifei became a member of the Kichi-Kichi-Ka Dance Group, which predated two better-known performance groups, the Bambang Brothers and Wadam All Stars. Both these groups were founded by Myrna Bambang, who in 1972 ascribed the commercial success of the Bambang Brothers to the fact that they had received a contract to perform at the Tropicana Club (Kompas 1972). In a 1979 newspaper article—published in the context of the death of several warías in a police raid—Myrna described how admission as a member of the Fantastic Dolls was rigorous and limited to the most talented on principles of “expertise” (keahlian). Myrna referred to warias’ position
in a taxonomy of feminine beauty, which she offered as a distinctive hierarchy that paralleled translations of Western psychological and medical taxonomies of gendered and sexual difference that circulated in the national media at the time.\(^9\)

Rather than assessing authenticity via psychiatric and psychological forms of expertise, however, Myrna sorted warias according to skills associated with feminine beauty. Myrna set out four “classes” of waria, which were evaluated by their ability to apply the skills and knowledge associated with feminine beauty: “High-class waria, who work as designers and who have a high position, those who have enough expertise and work in salons, and as artists and so on, those who are pretty [cantik cantik] but don’t have any expertise, and those waria who don’t have a pretty face and don’t have any skills” (Kompas 1979c). Myrna’s account paralleled my own observations during fieldwork, when warias sometimes evaluated one another based on a rather harsh criteria of “quality” that rested on their ability to align themselves according to beauty standards expected in a given situation. This at times painful evaluation of quality among warias tied public gender to citizenship in ways that Tom Boellstorff characterized as “indicators of a shifting state of being accepted by society” (2007, 105). Myrna’s emphasis in the 1979 newspaper article both reveals the centrality of economic improvement to gendered recognition and helps to locate it within an emergent governmental framework in which appearances were adjudicated within a regime of public order.

For warias, citizenship also rested on the capacity to acquire, deploy, and demonstrate the expertise of accomplishing public gender in the service of others. In this environment, the role of performance groups like the Fantastic Dolls in shaping the meanings of waria as a category of affiliation cannot be overstated. During my fieldwork, warias would spontaneously narrate the way in which the Fantastic Dolls represented a paradigmatic example of improving themselves in pursuit of acceptance. In a newspaper article that focused on the efforts of waria to accomplish acceptance, Nancy Iskandar explained that the primary objective of the Fantastic Dolls was to “introduce waria to society” (Kompas 1990, 5). Part of the relationship between cabaret performances and recognition emerged out of an emphasis on what warias called authenticity (asli), a claim that appeared grounded in whether or not they were recognized as warias when offstage as well. Part of the possibilities for recognition therefore concerned the more general publics for whom warias’ performances were intended; the group was asli in part because it was famous throughout Indonesia for being composed of warias, recognized across all segments of society in a way that transcended a partial or privatized “queer counterpublic” (Paramaditha 2018, 75). The relationship between recognition and public gender expressed by warias appears to have grown out of the emphasis on the relationship between authenticity and appearances since the emergence of Indonesian national identity in the colonial period.
This historical discourse of the surface of the body as a locus for anxieties about authenticity was revealed in the emphasis, both expressed in everyday narratives of warrias themselves and in reporting about the Fantastic Dolls, on waria’s capacity to transform themselves not in terms of gender but in terms of national identity: “There are those among them that are made up [dandan] as Cher, a Hollywood actress who has won an Oscar. There are those that are in the style of Boy George, the male singer from England who often dresses up as a woman” (Kompas 1990, 5). For warrias, the practice of dandan established recognition as a kind of drawing and crossing entwined boundaries of gender and nation.

The only video recording of the group that I have seen was of one of its final performances at the Millennium Hotel in Jakarta in August 2004, provided to me by Nancy Iskandar. Although it does not, of course, date from the New Order period, which is the historical focus of this book, it offers some valuable insights that suggest the aesthetic style and content of the group’s performances in the 1970s and 1980s. Newspaper reporting and firsthand accounts I collected of the group’s performances suggested that the Fantastic Dolls’ performances consisted of an array of acts that included singing, dancing, magic, striptease, and comedy, usually glossed as cabaret. In the recording of the 2004 performance, the audience appears to be mostly male employees from a corporation or a government department. The performance starts with Myrna taking the stage, her makeup and clothing presenting more explicitly the logic of combination invoked in the very term waria; the left side of her body is dressed as a military general in uniform, complete with mustache and beard, and the right side of her body is a feminine, glamorous diva. Holding a microphone, she moves to the front of the stage, and with the side of her body decorated as a general facing the audience, she drops the pitch of her voice to a gruff growl. Switching the orientation of her body along with her voice, she introduces the Fantastic Dolls with their tag-line: “Singing [in a low-pitched voice], dancing [in a high-pitched voice], and joking [again in a low-pitched voice], without nungging [bending over] [finally, in a high-pitched voice].” She then switches to English to announce an “all-Indonesian female impersonation show,” continuing on to oscillate between a low- and high-pitched voice at the beginning of each sentence. Yet even as this performance relied on a juxtaposition of a binary format of male and female, it more precisely reflected a concern born out of a pair of symbols tied to the authoritarian New Order: a unification and hence effort to overcome forms of military and state power, reflected in the General and the Diva.

Several routines followed this act; warias sang in sequined evening gowns, danced in Brazilian carnival costumes, and shook their bodies in the garb of Egyptian belly dancing. One waria sang a dangdut performance, a kind of Indonesian popular music, but did so wearing a Japanese-style kimono. Through
appropriating caricatured symbols of national identity, this performance estab-
lished a symbolic universe that showed warias’ prowess at imagining other ways
of transcending and becoming authentically Indonesian. I want to stress that my
reading of the Fantastic Dolls’ performance should not be interpreted as a theory
of gender per se, but rather as a means to reflect on the performative qualities of
citizenship. What the Fantastic Dolls articulated was a hope for a kind of minor
belonging in the context of the forms of state citizenship offered during the New
Order, drawing on gendered symbolism to pursue the possibility of an authentic-
ity that transcended state control. If imitation was a component of the hundreds
of performances by the Fantastic Dolls and in beauty pageants since the early
New Order, it was an imitation of national identity and not gender. Warias knew
their gender; after all, it was recognized by community and kin, even if not by
the state. What their appropriation of various, highly stereotyped national outfits
suggested was the tenuousness of state control over the meanings of authent-
Indonesian national identity. Theirs was an expression of hope in alternative pos-
sibilities through which recognition might be imagined and practiced.

When considered in light of longer histories of recognition in Indonesia, war-
ias’ description of dandan not only reflects the imposition of Euro-American
understandings of the modern self through a biopolitics of gender, but also
suggests how gender is positioned within a broader condition of visual power.
The performances by the Fantastic Dolls bring to mind what Lauren Berlant has
called “diva citizenship,” a form that “does not change the world . . . [but is] a
moment of emergence that marks unrealized potentials for subaltern political
activity” (1997, 223). The kinds of performances at work here had less to do
with expression of the self, but rather gesture to the historical preoccupations of
“authenticity” and “imitation” that have been central to imagining citizenship
in Indonesian postcolonial modernity. The centrality of seeing and being seen
to the forms of recognition sought by warias through the Fantastic Dolls and
other performance groups means grappling with more unstable and pleasur-
able operations of visual power, beyond the anxious gaze in which “state surveil-
ance . . . produced suspicion, first of all of oneself” (Siegel 2006, 160). Rather
than only an object of the forms of state surveillance and violence that character-
ized New Order rule, appearances—and public gender—were also locations for
more unruly and hopeful forms of participation in mass publics.

A Procedure for Public Order

To be sure, beauty pageants and performance groups were sites where only a
limited number of warias could participate in public life. Among many warias
I spoke to, as well as in descriptions of the motivations for performance groups such as the Fantastic Dolls, a consistently expressed objective of participating in such groups was a desire to dispel the association between warias and forms of public sexuality on the streets of the city late at night. A corresponding concern was a desire to expand the locations where warias felt comfortable. Even though the early part of the New Order saw warias become increasingly visible, their experience of public space remained fraught with challenges. The acceptance that they struggled to achieve was always partial, dependent on the audience who recognized them. Although a glamorous femininity granted warias visibility in some quarters of the national media, in other places their very presence was met with the accusation that they were pornographic and therefore incompatible with the nation. Ultimately, these contestations over what it was to look like an authentic Indonesian were a concern that focused as much on appearances as it did on the space that warias were permitted to occupy.

As introduced in chapter 2, from the late 1960s and intensifying in the late 1970s, the extension of forms of recognition to warias was largely considered in terms of whether they could meet a set of standards associated with the norms of feminine beauty. Warias emphasized the importance of the guidance (pembinaan) programs offered by the Jakarta city government under Governor Sadikin, considered a watershed moment for its bestowal of the potential role that they could play in society. Public gender was central to the everyday management of the modernizing project of development. Binary gender was a form of self-improvement tied to bodily cultivation that symbolized and enacted economic forms of development at the level of the individual. Yet the history of warias highlights moments when the body was not a docile subject of state discipline but rather an unruly medium for alternate claims to modes of recognition, which shifted the stakes of citizenship from an imagined community to concerns over space.

After the end of the New Order in 1998, gendered forms of self-cultivation remained a crucial technique used to address what regional governments throughout the country have assessed, in familiar terms: that warias posed a disruption of public order. The pembinaan vocational training programs have continued to operate as a crucial form of discipline through which not only warias but a range of nonconforming citizens were provided with the tools to facilitate their rehabilitation into society. One guide for the provision of social services to warias, published in 2008 by the national Department of Social Affairs, is an example of the format of the guidance programs warias have participated in since the late 1960s. The cover of the booklet is a photograph of a group of warias onstage at a beauty pageant, each wearing a crown, and the winner with a trophy. This photograph resembles in many respects the press photograph from the 1969 Queen
of the Miss Imitation Girls competition. The guide stresses that accomplishing a polished modern femininity is not only concerned with self-cultivation but positions the individual waria as a participant in a wider social collective. It presents this conceptualization of personhood on economic grounds: “As individuals or as a part of society, warias possess a potential within them, which enables development of a more constructive direction, to facilitate empowerment of waria in the development of the nation” (Indonesian Department of Social Welfare 2008, 3). Reducing gender to a process aimed at maximizing participation through a set of procedures, the guide presents a series of universal “indicators” through which social workers and other trained experts could evaluate warias’ capacity to participate in their own improvement and in doing so become participants in a project of national development.

Both this guide, and the vocational training furnished by municipalities that sought to achieve these aims, reflect a view that addresses public gender on technological terms, a counterpart to the municipal regulations directed at prohibiting or limiting warias’ movement in public space. Both the guide and vocational training present feminine beauty in terms that Christopher Kelty has called a “procedure,” a “set of rules, techniques, and tactics for organizing people, issues, and things in the service of collective and equitable decision-making, getting things done, and/or changing the way things are” (2019, 3). The implementation of these schemes relied on a disavowal of warias’ own self-knowledge—a struggle over the possibilities of recognition—that Sandy Stone has attributed to medical transsexuality in the United States, “a taxonomy of symptoms, criteria for differential diagnosis, procedures for evaluation, reliable courses of treatment, and thorough follow up” (1992, 162). Although concerned with facilitating transformations at the level of the individual self, warias in their position as beauty experts presented that self as embedded within a specific experience of collective belonging, made possible by the scale of society. Even as the locus of improvement was the individual self, the measurement of progress toward its accomplishment is an individual’s position within society, a criterion of acceptance over which individuals have little control. The participation of warias as beauty experts in a national public and the self that it indexes reflects the application of technology to limit the possible alternate routes to recognition through public gender. The vision that warias presented of society was an alternative collective to that of a state with its emphasis on order. Despite the potential for making and seeing as a part of alternative publics, the specific connection between public gender and the self during the New Order transformed warias into a potential disruption. In this way, they were placed under a suspicion that never entirely disappeared.